

“Critical Studies on the Early History of Buddhism in Sri Lanka” By Venerable Professor Dhammavihari Thera

Reviewed By Mahendra Siriwardene

Venerable Professor Dhammavihari Thera has, as always, appealed in this collection of Essays for reason in the settlement of divisive tendencies that come up again and again in our body politic. He compares the peace and amity that prevailed in our fair land from the time of the outright defeat of Elara by the redoubtable Sinhala warrior king Dutugemunu, with the present day acrimonious debates on question of rights of one community against those of the other.

In the acrimonious context that has continued to this present day, prospects of peace continues to recede from our confines with each passing day at a time when peace has become the imperative of the hour.

It is the learned monk’s contention that the war Dutugemunu fought against Elara was not at all similar to what Emperor Asoka waged against the Kalingas. While the latter was a war of attrition, the Dutugemunu-Elara war was more to consolidate the territorial integrity of the land, coupled with the need to preserve the newly inherited Buddhism as the state / national religion of our land. The ancient kings have had to protect the Buddha-Dhamma in the land from the onslaughts of the invading aliens. The Venerable Professor has in words of unmistakable fervour pointed out that the momentous event of that time was not one with the menacing scope of destruction but one of orderly transition from a usurper to the legitimate heirs of the land. That it caused the destruction of many a soldier and warrior was more in the line of duty than as a means to cause outrage.

At this point of time the necessity arises to put aright the question of the

cowardice of King Kavantissa, the father of prince Dutugemunu. It had been said again and again that the prince had sent women's clothing to his regal father to portray this very cowardice.

The historical context aborts this error when the Venerable Monk, Dhammavihari culling from authentic historical sources, points out that King Kavantissa had built fortifications all along the route from his kingdom in the South toward Anuradhapura, anticipating the dire threat that he foresaw from these destructive hordes. The Venerable Thera points out that these actions, far from being the acts of a coward, lays bare the military strategy that the King had lain to act upon at a time opportune.

Another amazing discovery of the Thera's historical research totally demolishes the hitherto held erroneous belief that King Dutugemunu, as he marched to battle in this war of liberation, carried relics of the Buddha in a killer weapon, namely a spear. Point by point, he has clearly indicated where the blunder has occurred and in whose hands. There is absolutely no need to fret and fume. No body's vanity need be hurt. One has to face facts with academic soundness.

As far back as 14th and 15th centuries, Sri Lankans knew Dutugemunu as a gentleman with religious decency, born of cultured royal parents, no matter what creative writers of today, with the freedom of the wild ass, venture to say about him and his parents. He indeed carried the relics in the royal sceptre which they referred as as *jaya kontaya* and *jayamaha kontaya*.

The Thera has also courageously and convincingly shown many such blunders in recording and interpreting Sri Lankan history committed by our historians, both ancient and modern. He has shown that the national scandals resulting from these have precipitously exposed us to severe international criticism. It is well worth pursuing the trail he has blazed.

The Venerable Professor happens to mention as follows: -“ Religious considerations, instead of being oil over troubled waters as they really ought to

be, have been used as highly inflammable stuff. In recent years as the conflict flared up into a raging battle, rescue teams who arrived on the scene from outside, mostly theoreticians like historians, political scientists and social analysts have acted less as fire-fighters than as flame-throwers well stocked with incendiaries. This sort of unscrupulous exploitation of world situations, we believe, is nothing peculiar to the Sri Lankan scene. It is being witnessed even as we attempt this study today. Sad to say they are internationally linked with political, religious and ethnic leanings.

“In situations like these, we need powerful, impartial and level headed leaders, both from within the states involved and outside, whose sincerity and honesty has to be unquestionably above board. Their world vision has to be much higher than that of the Allies or of the Axis of World War Two. They must firmly demand that social justice and human rights must gain priority over petty, disproportionate ethnic or religious demands. The total concept of humanity is a much larger and a more worthy cause to serve. Other forms of thinking and approaches contrary to this, daily call upon the people of this land to pay wages which they could realistically ill afford to pay.”

Incendiaries apart, the monograph " Critical studies on the early history of Buddhism in Sri Lanka " comes up with many a passage that provokes thought expressly for the diffusing of the difficult situation that Sri Lanka is faced with today, as it was centuries before. It also affords the reader into the insights into the times when Sri Lanka served as powerful though peaceful catalyst of the Dhamma to the then known world such as Afghanistan, Iran Iraq and Western Turkestan. The book is cheap in price and well worth having as a handbook to be read again and again to pour calm over vexed nerves. The publisher of the book is Buddhist Cultural Centre, Nedimala, Dehiwala and available also at many other well known outlets such as the Buddhist Book Shop at the Narada Center on the Sarana Road as well as the Buddhist Book Centre in the premises of the All Ceylon Buddhist Congress on the Bauddhaloka Mawatha which is a branch of the centre at Nedimala.

